DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 156 CG 017 527

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TITLE Effects of Social Reality on Self-Symbolizing.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association (Philadelphia, PA, April 6-9, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Females; *Goal Orientation; Higher Education; Metacognition; *Recognition (Achievement); Self Concept; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Social Reinforcement; Success
IDENTIFIERS *Self Completion Theory

ABSTRACT

Symbolic self-completion theory postulates that an individual experiencing a shortcoming in one symbolic dimension of a self-defined goal will emphasize an alternative symbolic dimension; these compensatory efforts are considered self-symbolizing. To test this hypothesis two studies were conducted using college females committed either to raising a family (N=47) or to a professional career (N=46). Subjects were encouraged to engage in self-descriptions supportive of their aspirations/self-definitions. These self-descriptions either were noticed by another or remained unnoticed. In an additional third condition, subjects were made to believe that another person would eventually take notice of their self-symbolizing. Finally, subjects were asked to describe their personality compared to the personality of successful people in their self-definitional realm. An analysis of the results showed that social reality moderated subjects subsequent claims of self-definitional potential. Actual and expected social reality subjects reported higher dissimilarity than no social reality subjects. These findings suggest that self-symbolizing noticed by another person leads to a stronger self-definitional completeness than unnoticed self-symbolizing. (BL)

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Effects of Social Reality on Self-Symbolizing

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This paper was presented at the 54th meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Philadelphia, April 6-9, 1983.

Abstract

In both studies reported subjects were encouraged to engage in self-descriptions supportive to their aspired-to self-definition. These self-descriptions were either noticed by another or remained unnoticed. This increment in social reality was found to moderate subjects' subsequent claims of self-definitional potential. Results are interpreted within the framework of symbolic self-completion theory.

Symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, 1982; Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982) addresses compensatory activities observed with individuals who are committed to self-defining goals, such as being a scientist, a parent, an athlete, and so forth. Since self-defining goals encompass multiple indicators of goal attainment or symbols of completeness (e.g., being a successful scientist can be indicated by publishing, teaching, presiding professional associations), the theory postulates that experiencing a shortcoming regarding one symbolic dimension leads to emphasizing an alternative symbolic dimension. Self-completion theory calls these compensatory activities "self-symbolizing efforts". The committed scientist, for instance, who falls short in background experience, e.g., has a poor methodological training, can always substitute by emphasizing symbols that are related to occupying a position, i.e.,the scientist can display an acquired title conspicuously. Or if there should be a shortcoming in performing relevant acts such as teaching, conducting research, publishing, etc., then self-symbolizing can take the form of bragging about a first-class education--in case it exists.

The postulate of self-completion theory that symbols of a self-definition are mutually exchangeable is in line with Lewin's thinking about substitute activities. Lewin (1926) suggested that the tension set up by the interruption of an activity might propel the individual to a substitute activity that aims at tension reduction via alternative goal attainment. Supporting Lewin's theorizing, his students found that subjects' interest in resuming an interrupted task was sharply curtailed when subjects were given the possibility of solving a substitute task. Similarly, Wicklund

and Gollwitzer (1982) have shown for a variety of different self-definitions (e.g., athlete, Catholic, businessman) and for a variety of different self-definitional symbols (e.g., positive self-descriptions, influencing others, displaying status symbols) that attainment on one symbolic dimension leads to reduced self-symbolizing on an alternative dimension, and conversely, that being weak on one symbolic dimension leads to an increase in self-symbolizing on an alternative dimension.

Lewin's student Wera Mahler (1933) made an interesting observation when conducting laboratory studies on the resumption of an interrupted task. She found that substitute activities that are noticed by others are more effective substitutes than those that remain unnoticed by others, i.e., the former lead to a smaller resumption rate than the latter. Mahler interpreted this finding by stating that the indication of goal attainment is enhanced when this indication becomes a social fact.

Mahler's observation seems relevant for self-completion processes. Her finding would suggest that self-symbolizing that is noticed by others leads to a more effective indication of self-definitional goal attainment and thus to a stronger sense of completeness. As a consequence, individuals whose self-symbolizing efforts are furnished with a social reality should show a reduced interest in accumulating further, alternative symbols of completeness.

To test this hypothesis we conducted two experiments with the following design: In the first part of each study subjects were encouraged to self-symbolizing efforts. These efforts were either noticed by another person or they remained unnoticed. In an additional third condition, subjects were only made to expect that another person would eventually take notice of their self-symbolizing. In each study subjects were then given a chance to acquire an additional self-definitional symbol,

i.e., they were asked to describe their personality vis-à-vis the personality of successful people in their self-definitional realm. It was predicted that subjects whose self-symbolizing efforts remained unnoticed by another person should describe their personality to be very similar to this "ideal" personality thus claiming potential in their aspired-to self-definition.

Subjects

Forty-seven female undergraduates committed to the self-defining goal of "raising a family" participated in Experiment 1. The 46 participants of Experiment 2, which was conducted one year later, were female undergraduates committed to the self-defining goal of "professional". For both experiments these self-definitional commitments had been established via a self-report procedure prior to the onset of the experiment.

Procedure

In Experiment 1 subjects were first asked to answer a number of questions that required either self-descriptive answers (e.g., how well do you get along with children?) or knowledge-related answers (e.g., what is the average number of children in an American family). The self-related questions allowed subjects to report any conceivable talent in regard to raising children, whereas the knowledge-related questions were difficult to twist into material for self-symbolizing. In the Actual Social Reality condition subjects found out that a partner subject had studied the self-relevant answers very carefully but had ignored the knowledge-related answers. Subjects in the No Social Reality condition found out that the partner subject had ignored the self-descriptive answers while studying only the knowledge-related answers. In the Expected Social Reality condition the experimenter told subjects

that the partner subject will at a later point in time study the self-descriptive answers.

In all conditions subjects were then introduced to a presumed "personality psychologist" who presented a semantic differential type questionnaire that already carried a pattern of answers. Subjects were told that this profile drawn onto the questionnaire (see Fig.1) is typically observed among successful mothers. Subjects were asked to fill out this personality questionnaire as it applied to themselves. Finally, they had to indicate on a 9-point scale how dissimilarly they perceived themselves compared to the "ideal" personality.

The proceedings of Experiment 2 differed only in three aspects. First, all subjects were committed to the self-definition "professional". Second, the self-related questions asked subjects to write down intended attainments rather than actual attainments. One of these questions read as follows: "What type of position do you plan to occupy in your professional career?" This change was made to test a contention by Lewin (1926) who stated that verbalizing an intention to act can very well function as a substitute for actual goal striving. Finally, the profile on the personality questionnaire was described as the "ideal" personality for a female professional.

Results

The sum of the squared differences between a subject's check marks and the "ideal" check marks was used as the first dependent variable. Actual Social Reality subjects and Expected Social Reality subjects obtained higher scores on this measure of dissimilarity to the "ideal" than No Social Reality subjects. This was true both for Experiment 1 (see Fig.2) and for Experiment 2 (see Fig. 3). All but one of these differences were significant at least at the .05 level. The difference between Expected Social Reality subjects and No Social Reality subjects in

Experiment 2 was less pronounced ($p < .07$).

Subjects' answers on the 9-point scale that measured self-perceived dissimilarity to the "ideal" nicely parallel the data pattern found for the squared difference measure. Again, this is true both for Experiment 1 (see Fig. 4) and for Experiment 2 (see Fig. 5). Actual and Expected Social Reality subjects reported higher dissimilarity than No Social Reality subjects. All these differences are significant at least at the .05 level.

Conclusion

The present experiments show that self-symbolizing noticed (or expected to be noticed) by another person makes subsequent self-symbolizing less necessary. It appears then that self-symbolizing furnished (or expected to be furnished) with a social reality leads to a stronger sense of self-definitional completeness than self-symbolizing lacking social reality. Whether individual's self-symbolizing is composed of descriptions of self-definitional attainments or descriptions of one's intentions to achieve such attainments does not seem to affect this phenomenon; neither does the type of self-defining goal involved (i.e., raising a family vs. planning a professional career).

The present findings are in line with Mahler's (1933) work on the effects of social reality on substitute activities. They are also compatible with the ideas of the "social interactionists". Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) insisted long ago that anything that becomes part of the individual's self is ultimately social. For them a sense of oneself as a parent, businessman, or any other self-definition, comes about only though the acknowledgement of others. A self-definition that is declared in the absence of this kind of social acknowledgement is thought of as empty and without psychological permanence.

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PERSONALITY PROFILE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please indicate your standing on the following personality traits.
Circle the appropriate number between each pair of adjectives below.

very warm	1 2 3 **4** 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12	very cold
very weak	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 **10** 11 12	very strong
very passive	1 2 **3** 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12	very active
very impatient	1 2 3 4 **5** 6 7 8 9 10 11 12	very patient
very rigid	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 **10** 11 12	very flexible
very suspicious	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 **9** 10 11 12	very trusting
very analytical	1 2 3 4 5 6 **7** 8 9 10 11 12	very intuitive
very dependent	1 2 **3** 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12	very independent
very competitive	1 2 3 4 **5** 6 7 8 9 10 11 12	very cooperative
very domineering	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 **10** 11 12	very submissive

Figure 1. Dependent measure: Personality questionnaire with the "ideal" personality profile.

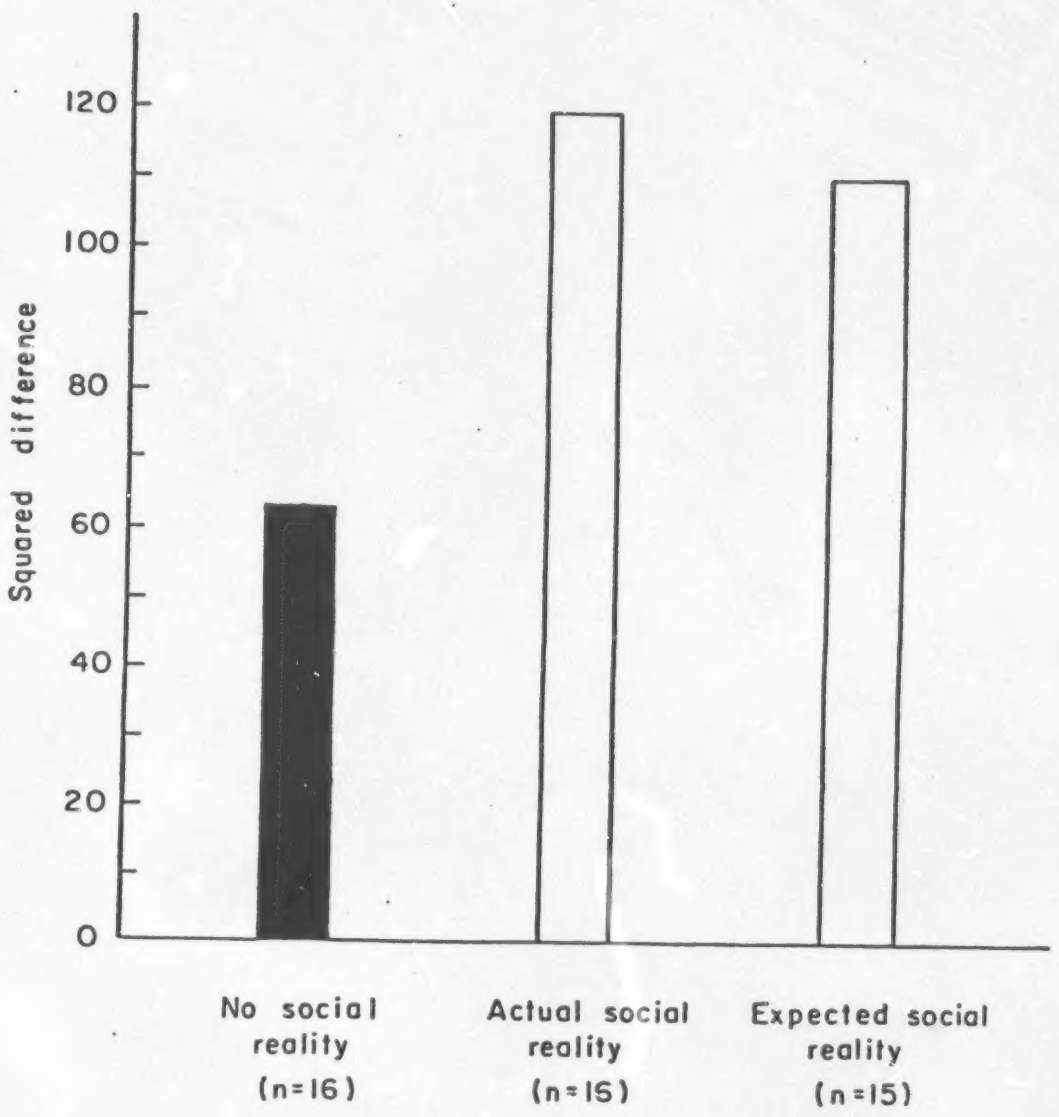

Figure 2. Experiment 1: Mean dissimilarity of own personality profile to the "ideal" profile (Squared Difference Index)

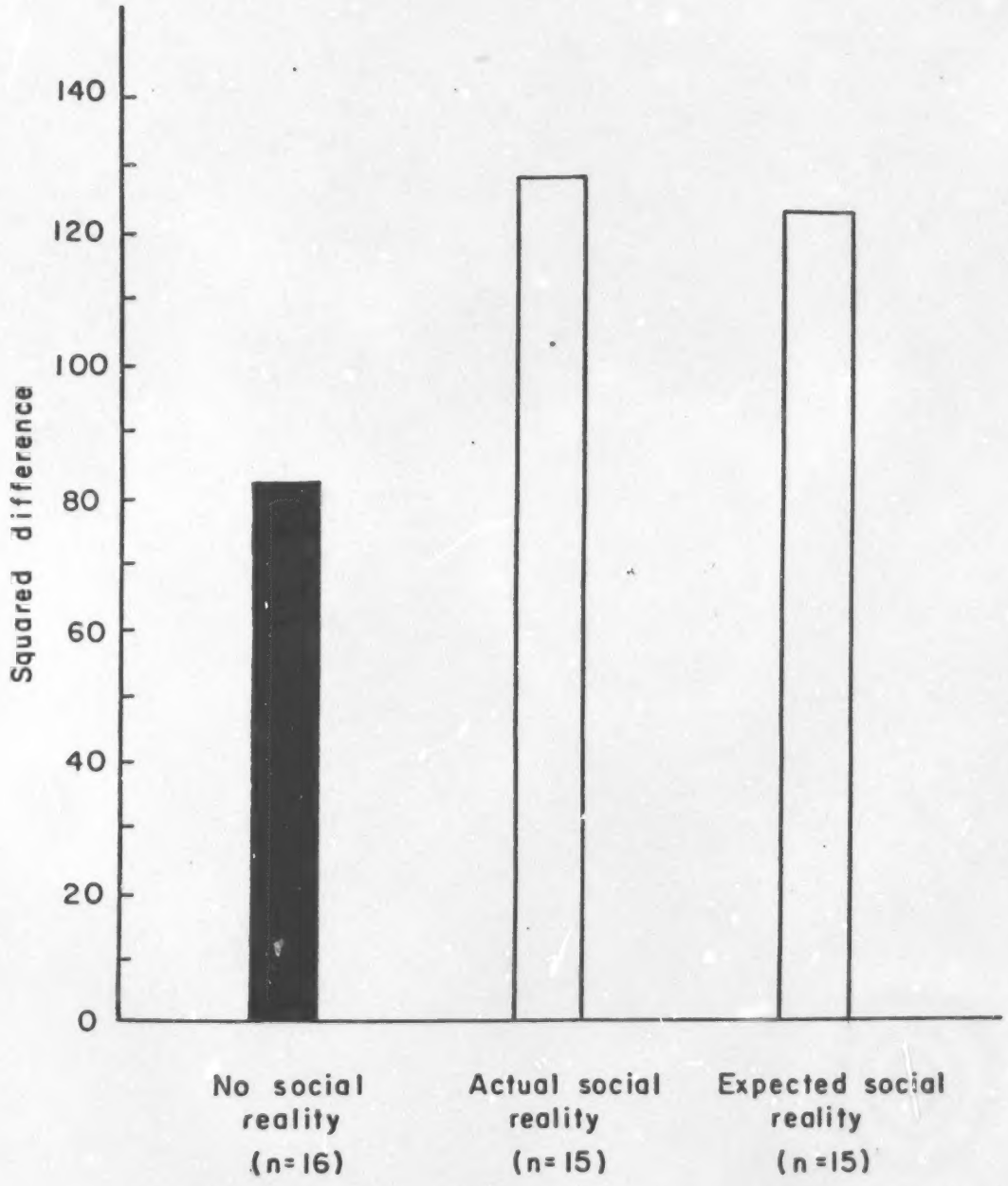

Figure 3. Experiment 2: Mean dissimilarity of own personality profile to the "ideal" profile (Squared Difference Index)

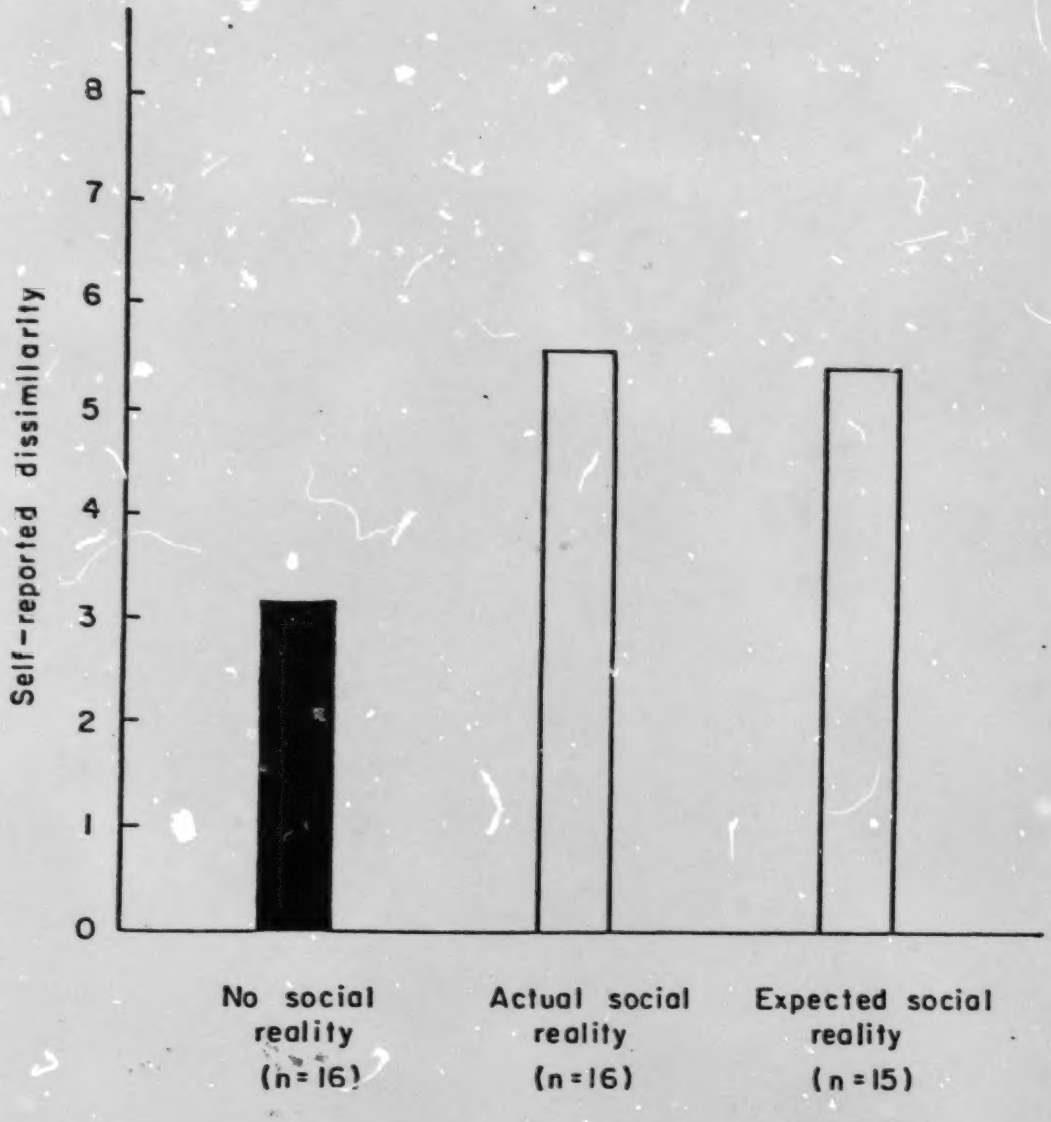

Figure 4. Experiment 1: Mean dissimilarity of own personality to the "ideal" personality (Self-Reported Dissimilarity)

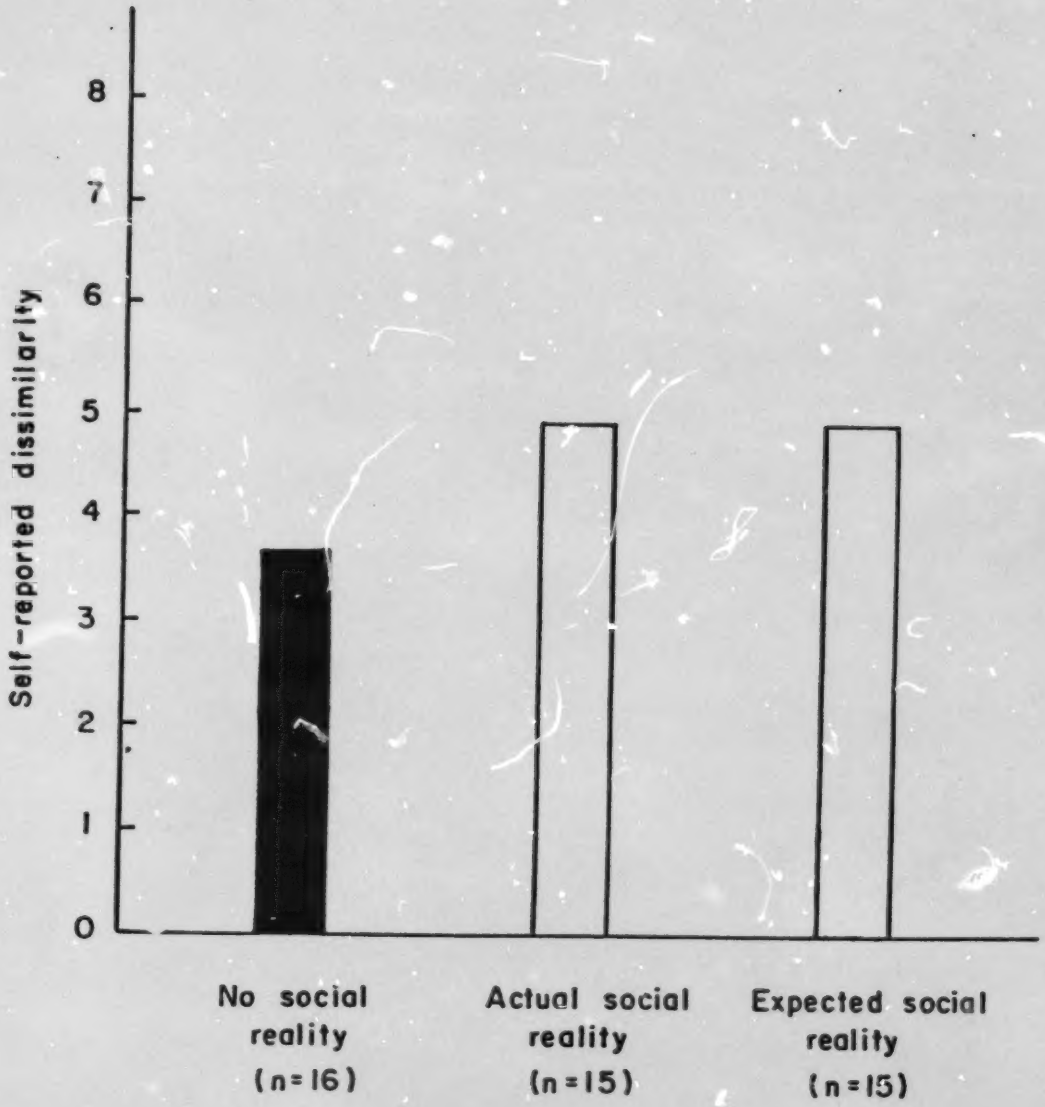

Figure 5. Experiment 2: Mean dissimilarity of own personality to the "ideal" personality (Self-Reported Dissimilarity)